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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 RANGOON 001046

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: NLD UNDER RENEWED HARASSMENT, URGES U.S. PRESSURE

Classified By: CDA Shari Villarosa for Reasons 1.4 (b,d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: NLD leaders told the Charge during a September 12 introductory call that GOB authorities had recently increased pressure on senior party officials, leading the NLD to actively avoid giving the SPDC any pretext to crack down on upcoming party events. At the same time, the GOB has eased up its intimidation of some rank and file members, but the NLD says this is a result of lingering confusion following the demise of the regime's military intelligence, as well as the SPDC's preoccupation with its own "internal problems." NLD leaders encouraged the United States to maintain its current approach (of pressure) and expressed displeasure with those who advocate engagement with the regime. END SUMMARY.

RENEWED PRESSURE ON LEADERS

¶2. (SBU) On September 12, the Charge, joined by P/E chief, made an introductory call on senior leaders of the National League for Democracy's Central Executive Committee (NLD CEC).

Representing the CEC at the meeting, which took place at the NLD's Rangoon headquarters, were Secretary U Lwin and senior economist U Nyunt Wei. After the call, the Charge also greeted CEC member U Than Tun as well as several dozen regional party leaders and members.

¶3. (C) U Lwin said that NLD leaders had recently experienced renewed pressure from GOB authorities. As a result, the party is actively avoiding giving the regime any pretext to disrupt the NLD's September 27 anniversary commemoration. In this context, U Lwin noted, he had advised NLD Chairman U Aung Shwe, who often represents the NLD in meetings with senior diplomats, to stay at home for "a rest." (Note: The NLD frequently makes minor accommodations to forestall a serious SPDC crackdown on party leaders; however, we don't recall many instances in which regime pressure has led CEC members to miss an opportunity to meet with U.S. diplomats. End Note.)

RENEWED SPACE FOR RANK AND FILE, BUT NOT BY DESIGN

¶4. (C) U Lwin said that in contrast to pressure on NLD leaders, the GOB was "not too tough" on party members in recent months. In particular, he said, authorities had been more tolerant of NLD activities in Mandalay, Magwe, and Sagaing Divisions--previously targets for the regime's most abusive posture toward the NLD (including the May 2003 attack on ASSK and her convoy). U Lwin said this "softening" was not a sign of greater freedom for the NLD, but rather a result of lingering confusion in the aftermath of the dismantling of former PM Khin Nyunt's military intelligence apparatus. U Lwin also opined that the SPDC was preoccupied with "internal problems," stemming in part from SPDC Chairman Than Shwe's declining health related, he said, to treatment for diabetes.

PRESSURE, NOT ENGAGEMENT

¶5. (C) The Charge asked the NLD leaders about their views on the recent Wilton Park meeting on Burma hosted by the British Government. U Lwin said that the NLD had been unable to attend due to a lack of access to passports and other travel documents, and he observed that conference organizers had been unable to secure the participation of "true representatives" of the democratic opposition. U Nyunt Wei said that the NLD "is happy that folks are concerned about Burma's future, but we (here inside the country) are living in the present."

¶6. (C) When asked for NLD positions on U.S. Burma policy, U Nyunt Wei said the party "would like the United States to maintain its current approach (of pressure)." He noted that the NLD had been quite displeased with an EU-sponsored conference earlier this year at which various academics had advocated engagement with the SPDC "simply because the military is entrenched and should therefore be tolerated." What is really needed, said U Nyunt Wie, is that the international community demand the SPDC "liberalize" by releasing ASSK and other political prisoners, opening political party offices, and starting a dialogue leading to national reconciliation. U Nyunt Wei specifically omitted "democracy" as a part of the liberalization, saying that this topic was for the political dialogue.

17. (C) The Charge noted that the current use of pressure--to demand the immediate and unconditional release of ASSK and other political prisoners, permit political parties to freely operate, and foster a broad, inclusive national reconciliation process--enjoyed broad, bipartisan support in Washington. When U Nyunt Wei observed that it was a question of "will" in standing up to the SPDC, the Charge assured him that support for Burma's democratic opposition remains strong, citing recent references to the Burma situation by both President Bush and Secretary Rice.

GLOBAL FUND

18. (C) The NLD leaders also raised the recent decision of the Global Fund to terminate its Burma programs and asked about follow-up plans to deliver humanitarian assistance. The Charge noted that the Fund had pulled out of Burma because the GOB had reneged on promises to allow adequate access, observing that it was unfortunate the regime placed such a low priority on development and the eradication of serious diseases.

19. (U) U Lwin closed the meeting by offering his condolences for the destruction wrought by Hurricane Katrina. "I've been to New Orleans several times," said the NLD Secretary, "and I am shocked by the impact of this natural disaster." (Note: NLD Chairman U Aung Shwe sent the Embassy a letter of condolence on September 6, which has been faxed to EAP/MLS. End Note.)

COMMENT: SIX YEARS LATER

10. (C) The Charge recalls meeting U Lwin, U Nyunt Wei, and two other NLD "Uncles" during an official visit to Burma six years ago. At the time, they seemed vigorous and engaged. During this meeting, they seemed beaten down with low expectations for change. We are one of the few diplomatic missions to regularly visit the NLD's headquarters and we will continue to search for other ways to boost spirits. END COMMENT.

Villarosa